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The behavior of the books' consumers in the current crisis

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Abstract

Our paper anchors on the changes that occurred in the consumer behavior in the nowadays economic crisis. Studies conducted by various researchers show how many changes have occurred since the global crisis hit in the recent years. Consumers tend to be more careful in their expenditure, focusing on obtaining an efficient shopping, differently reducing consumption on various product categories. The purpose of this paper is to investigate the effects caused by the economic crisis on books' consumers from Iasi area, by studying their consumption behaviour. Our research will provide the share of consumers that admit to being affected by this crisis, the moment perceived by them as being the start of the crisis, and how the books' consume has been affected by the crisis.

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1. Introduction

Studies conducted by researchers show various changes that have occurred once the global crisis hit. Some of the effects of the nowadays financial crisis on consumers are as follows: uncertainty of employment and unemployment, lower disposable income, lower credit financing opportunities, vulnerability prices (Allen and Gale, 2007, Gramley, 2008). The same opinion is shared by Bebej and T. and M. Polak (2008) who state that people's behavior during the crisis is ruled by the fear of negative effects of the phenomenon. In the context of the crisis, consumers tend to be more careful in their expenditure, focusing on shopping efficiency, reducing consumption differently, depending on each product categories. Consumers are seeking a higher Quality-Price-Ratio (QPR) (Hawkins, 2008).

Simon Hermann (2009), in the *Journal of Customer Behaviour*, points out that the nowadays crisis has severe impact on consumers. Issues such as the perceived risk, the fear about purchase and the products acquisition benefits are now becoming more important than the "nice to have" attribute. Like their predecessors who went through the Great Depression, the consumers who are experiencing the nowadays crisis go through a permanent change of their behaviour during the global crisis (Flatters and Willmott, Harvard Business Review, 2009). A report made by Nielsen (2009) shows that the severity of the crisis has brought changes in the values that usually the consumers relied on, changes in the consumer's habits and even in their lifestyle, at least for short term, in most countries. According to the same report, consumers have made savings both for the acquisition of goods and services. Also, the study made by Decitica in 2009 (Four Distinct Types of Consumers Emerging From the Recession) reveals the

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same main directions in consumer's behavior changes, redrawing the consumer map into four groups: "Steadfast Frugalists", "Involuntary Penny-Pinchers", "Pragmatic Spenders" and "Apathetic Materialists"

2. Romanian consumer in the context of the crisis

In terms of consumer behaviour in the context of the crisis, Andi Dumitrescu said in an article in the Wall Street (2010) that Romanian consumer has a dual behaviour: he would like both to save and spend, although the revenue fell considerably. This duality occurs depending on the economic situation, having as driving engine the exposure to increasingly larger and more diversified possibility of spending the money, made available to us by our society. Official data of the National Institute of Statistics (2010) confirms that Romanians have saved more since the crisis hit, also reducing their spending on certain products or services. But not everyone manages to save. The data are only averages of the savings made by a smaller percentage of the population. A GfK survey initiated in 2010 shows that despite the tendency to save is strong most of the Romanians fail to do so, and they struggle to keep the balance between financial security and the need to spend. Thus, it is stated that the main trend of consumers in times of crisis is the rediscovery of moderation at all levels. People have become more cautious with money - carefully planning their personal finances and investments. Alice Mihai (ISRA Center Marketing Research, 2010) points out that with the current crisis, the consumer becomes more analytical and more involved in the choices he makes.

A study of Mednet Marketing Research (2010) revealed an increasing impact of the 2009 crisis, bringing changes in the Romanian consumers behavior based on the negative aspects of the current phenomenon. Supporting the same idea, another study (Initiative, 2010) shows that over half of Romanians have changed their buying habits and continue to adopt new consumer behavior in the context of the crisis issues that marked their lifestyle. Analysis of these studies that have sought to determine the changes at the consumer level have more-over confirmed both the views of many specialists from around the world and the results of the studies conducted in other countries affected earlier than Romania by the crisis. The year 2011 brought significant changes in consumer behavior in a relatively short period. There have been achieved so many negative minimum thresholds in terms of both the public confidence in present and future economic situation and the consumption level. For three quarters of the Romanians, the crisis proved to be more severe than expected, being forced to significantly reduce the spending costs and confine themselves to spend only for the basic needs.

As many scholars have mentioned and indicated in many researches regarding the consumer behavior in the context of crisis, neither all the consumers have felt the crisis effects in the same way nor all the categories of products and services have been affected equally from the changes. According to a study made by the Center for Study and Research in Culture (2010), Romanians book consumption recorded significantly decreasing values in the last two years. Besides the fact that Romania ranks last in Europe as for book consumption, a phenomenon such as the nowadays crisis exacerbates this situation through its effects on society and through the changes brought in the consumer behaviour.

2.1. Research Design

Scope of Research: Moving from a succinct analysis of the crisis impact on Iasi city consumers, we will focus on investigating book consumers behaviour. In this research we want to determine some aspects of consumption, more precisely, the changes that have occurred once the crisis hit. We want to find out whether and in what manner changes have occurred in book consumers behavior.

Objectives of research: One aims to determine the book consumers behavior of Iasi city, along with the changes happened due to nowadays crisis.

Hypotheses:

H1: Most consumers have experienced crisis since 2010 (Mediafax online article).

H2: Increasing taxes as a result of the crisis, having the largest effect on consumers (study of Mednet Marketing Research, 2010).

H3: After the crisis hit, most consumers bought the same products but in smaller quantities (study of Mednet Marketing Research, 2010).

H4: Over 50% of the consumers have been affected by the crisis in the purchase of books (unstructured interview with the sellers of Iasi city bookshops).

H5: Most consumers bought the last book in 2010 (ibid. Ass.4).

H6: Most frequently purchased books are belletristic literature books (ibid. Ass.4).

H7: When the crisis hit, most often, consumers bought new books (cultural topic forums)

H8: The pleasure of reading is the most important reason for buying books (ibid. Ass.4).

H9: Consumers are purchasing books, more often, from bookshops (cultural topic forums)

H10: After the crisis hit, consumers bought fewer books than before (ibid. Ass.4).

H11: There is an obvious connection between consumer behaviour after the crisis hit and purchase of books in the context of the crisis (ibid. Ass.4).

H12: There is a clear connection between the crisis effect on the purchase of books and the manner in which consumers have acquired books after the crisis hit (cultural topic forums)

Method: Based on the use of secondary data to identify and define the research topic, by their evaluating and filtering we came to the conclusion that the use of structured questionnaire-based survey is the most appropriate method. The tested units are represented by people aged 18 years and over, from Iasi city. Their selection is based on non-random survey, assaying a sample of 100 people by using “shares method” and observing official statistics.

Data collection: This process has been developed within eight days, from October 28 to November 4, 2011 on the territory of Iasi city in different areas. 100 people were surveyed.

2.2. Study Results

Out of those 100 people, three (3) persons state they have experienced crisis since 2008, thirty-three (33) since 2009, fifty-seven (57) since 2010 and seven (7) since 2011. Crisis effects are largely represented by: lower wages/pensions (for over 43% of respondents), increase in taxes (for over 53% of respondents), job insecurity (for more than 58% of the respondents), and also decrease in fringe benefits (for over 18% of respondents).

After the crisis emerged, most of the consumers buy the same products but in smaller quantities (40%). A change in behaviour is also reflected by the consumers who buy fewer and cheaper products (29%) along with those who buy the same quantities but cheaper products (14%). However, a rate of 17% has not changed their consumer behaviour, buying the same products in the same quantities. Accordingly, for 83% of the respondents there has been a change in behaviour once the crisis hit.

As for the crisis effect on the purchase of books, the results show that more than half (66%) of the consumers are affected by the crisis in this respect. As regards crisis effect on the purchase of books presented per each sex: 70% of men state they are affected (“yes”) while only 62% women say so. The farthest last book purchase is one year away from the survey period, and the percentage of those belonging to this category is 11%. Most respondents (15%) stated that their last book purchase was in September 2011 while 10% in October 2011, their statements being somehow supported by the fact that this period represents the beginning of the school and university year. A comparable situation is in June 2011, with a rate of 12%. The remaining values are divided between May 2011 and April 201, less July and August. By aggregating the percentages for 201, Assumption 5 is confirmed.

Studying the central tendency indicator, the mode, it is revealed that for the belletristic books type the dominant value is “1”, which encodes the answer “yes, I buy books of this category”. This means that the most frequently purchased type is the belletristic book (54% of respondents have selected this response). The next type of books in the scale of dominant value is the specialized books type (42% of respondents usually buy such books). In terms of consumers buying habits the following categories have been selected in descending order: 19% - usually buy school textbooks, 9% - usually buy dictionaries, 8% - usually buy religious books, 6% - usually buy books for children and

2% - usually buy encyclopedias. The analysis also shows that the most common way of getting books is the purchase of new books. Out of the 100 respondents, a number of 74 said that after the crisis hit they mostly bought only new books. By applying descriptive statistics, it appears that the most important reasons regarding the purchase of books are learning/study and pleasure of reading, getting an average which is the same with the one resulted from the grades the respondents have given, namely 3.81. The mode also shows that the most often grade the respondents have given for these reasons is 4 on a scale from 1-5. The average records significantly lower values for other reasons, such as enrichment of the library (2.14) or making a collection complete (1.71).

Analyzing by means of descriptive statistics, the frequency of responses to the questions describing the place of purchase before and after the crisis hit we have found out the place where the consumers buy books from. So, before the crisis, consumers have most frequently bought books from the library. Out of the 100 respondents, a percentage of 73% purchases books from the bookstores, 10% from the antique stores, 9% from the Internet, 7% from the supermarket and only 1% from the kiosk.

After the crisis hit, most consumers bought fewer books than before (49%), and a percentage of 9% even gave up to buy books. However, a percentage of 36% said they did not change their buying behaviour regarding the purchase of books while 6% stated they bought more books after the crisis hit. In order to identify whether there is or not any association between the buying behaviour of consumers after the crisis hit and the purchase of books in the context of crisis we use χ^2 test of independence. Chi test of independence shows no association between the consumer purchasing behaviour after the crisis hit and the purchase of books in the context of the crisis.

χ^2 (df=3, N=100) = 4,750, sig = 0,191 Cramer's = 0,218

The statistics test results disprove Ass.11 that states there is a connection between the variables analyzed.

In order to identify the existence of an association between the crisis effect on the purchase of books and the manner in which consumers have acquired books after the crisis hit we use χ^2 test of independence. The chi-test of independence shows that there is no association between the crisis effect on the purchase of books and the manner in which consumers have acquired books after the crisis hit.

χ^2 (df=1, N=100) = 0,306, sig = 0,580 Cramer's = 0,055

2.3. Research Findings

Based on the study results, we may draw up the following research findings (Conclusions):

- C.1 Most consumers have been affected by the 2010 crisis (57%);
- C.2 More than half of the book readers have experienced the effects of economic and financial phenomenon in buying books (66%);
- C.3 Crisis effects on consumers are especially caused by the following two aspects: lower wages/pensions and increase in taxes;
- C.4 After the crisis hit, consumers have bought the same products but in smaller quantities (40%) while in the case of books they have bought less than before experiencing crisis effects (49%);
- C.5 Most frequently purchased books are belletristic literature books and the most common way of getting books is: buying new books.
- C.6 Purchase of books is based mainly on the following reasons: learning/study and the pleasure of reading.

Consumer's prudence and care is explained by his lower confidence. During 2009 the confidence index decreased significantly, registering unprecedented values, the consumer assessing more attentively his needs and the way of meeting such needs. Studies conducted both nationally and internationally have shown significant changes in the consumers behaviour, who become more pessimistic about the future. Fear of losing their job, failure to pay a debt, concerning about increasingly low standard of living become more obviously. Crisis impact level on the Romanian consumer has increased from one period to another, buying smaller quantities of the favorite products (48%) or migrating to cheaper products (9%).

As a result of damaging the consume and purchasing behaviour, many types of services and goods were concerned, including cultural goods. Besides the fact that book consumption in Romania is quite modest, the crisis lays greater stress on this aspect. Although bookshops have tried various strategies to retain and attract the public,

the book fairs have shown a decrease in the number of buyers, one reason being the insufficient financial resources for consumers. For this reason, readers have turned their attention to promotions and discounts. Thus, under the influence of the economic climate there is a change in the book consumer profile. Half of the Romanians did not buy books in 2009, while in 2010; the phenomenon began to slow due to the efforts made by bookshops in shaping their activities according to the consumer expectations. However, the same first idea prevails: having a tight budget, calculated and shared more prudently, the book reader has become more careful in making purchase.

A possible direction of the future researches in terms of book consumption could be materialized through a research made both on bookshops and consumers. Thus, one can observe the consumer behaviour fluctuations in the virtue of the activities a bookshop undertakes through various strategies.

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